

## Birds replace toxic chemicals in ridding fields of mice

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The female vole (a small field mouse) has met her match.

Instead of using toxic chemicals to fight field mice, who produce up to 11 babies every three weeks that eat field produce around the country, farmers are now using barn owls and kestrels to reduce the destructive population.

A national project to raise owls and kestrels that eat the small rodents in agricultural fields has been started by Tel Aviv University, the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel and the Agriculture and Environmental Protection ministries.

Last week's official launch - the first of its kind in the world to receive governmental funding - is based on the natural predators of voles.

The launch of the national project, which originated 10 years ago as an experiment in the Beit She'an Valley, coincides with the birds' nesting season.

The official ceremony was held in the Beit Dagan office of outgoing Agriculture Ministry director-general Yael Shealtiel, who this week becomes head of the Jewish National Fund.

The project for natural extermination of rodent pests in fields around the country is expected to make our food more healthful and prevent dangerous chemicals from seeping into the soil and aquifers.

A decade ago, large numbers of migrating birds were killed in the Beit She'an valley when pesticides were left in the fields to kill field mice. TAU zoologist Dr. Yossi Leshem, director of the International Center for the Study of Migrating Birds at Latrun, was one of the pioneers of the approach to use natural means to get rid of the voles.

Since then, a pilot program in Kibbutz Sde Eliahu and Beit She'an established bird houses for the predator owls and kestrels.

In the beginning of the pilot project, farmers given the nesting boxes didn't know how to use them and placed them in unshaded areas, resulting in many owls and kestrels dying.

"So we sent in professional instructors to show them how to do it. There are now 1,600 nesting boxes - 500 of them used ammunition boxes donated by Israel Military Industries. One pair of barn owls can eat 2,000 mice a year at night. The kestrels, which are also willing to eat birds but prefer rodents, eat voles during the day," explained Leshem.

As these areas are very hot in the summer, the predator birds were given "luxury facilities," Leshem told *The Jerusalem Post* on Wednesday. "They have double roofs and windows on three sides to increase ventilation."

Cats, he said, cannot be used as predators to eat the mice because the felines also eat the birds.

Until the nesting boxes were installed in the fields, barn owls had lived in barns, and under the eaves of old rooftops, but as the areas became developed with modern buildings, there was nowhere for them to live.

The nesting boxes have increased the predator population, with 650 pairs now nesting in the boxes.

The nesting project will, over the next three years, expand through the Hula Valley, the Golan, the Acre Valley, Lachish, the central and western Negev and the Jordan Valley.

"As we show we know how to do it successfully, we may export the idea and teach it in African countries," Leshem said.

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